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Canonization as Praxis: A Study of Film Programming

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Canonization as Praxis: A Study of Film Programming

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my parents for their unconditional love and support and for almost always picking up the phone.

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Abstract

Canonization as Praxis: A Study of Film Programming

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Film programmers serve as the vital educators in art house cinema spaces. Programmers translate academic, critical, and historical narratives and texts into film programs to engage and educate their audiences. Alamo Drafthouse Cinema and Austin Film Society Cinema, both based in Austin, Texas, serve as case studies to explore how film programming occurs in both a for-profit company as well as in a non-profit organization. The film programming practices in both of these spaces challenge traditionally held beliefs about cinematic canons. By leveraging canons as marketing tools as well as educational tools, in these cinemas, film programmers utilize their positionality to expand and complicate understandings of cinema.

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Introduction: The Flexible Canon: *A Study in Shifting Cinematic Canons in Criticism and Programming*

As an undergraduate student in Cinema Studies courses, I was excited to be able to channel my lifelong love of film into an academic discipline. But during my senior year, I began to wonder about the cinematic canons in which I had been educated. I wanted to question who made these decisions, how they made these decisions, and why exactly they picked the films they did. In developing an independent study on canon formation, I hoped to find the answers to these questions through the course of a semester. Of course, more questions than answers emerged throughout the independent study. After graduation, I continued to think about canon formation as an audience member enjoying the programmed content at art house cinemas in New York. These experiences all led me to study at the University of Texas and to develop my thesis project with a focus on the institutions that develop, perpetuate, and continually reassess canons. As either a participant and/or observer in the institutions of academia, criticism, and art house cinemas, I have found myself in the position to explore how these institutions negotiate cinematic canons.

This thesis understands cinematic canons to be a grouping of films that are essential to understanding the art form.[1] A film would presumably be deemed worthy of a canon based on its aesthetic, critical, educational, historical, or industrial importance – just to

[1] This understanding of canon borrows from filmmaker and writer Paul Schrader's 2006 *Film Comment* article "Canon Fodder," wherein he delineated his own cinematic canon. Schrader himself references writer Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* as forming a canon based on artists without whom the canon "[could] not properly exist" (Schrader 47).

name a few qualifiers. Academics and cinematic critics often cite or strive to construct film canons, pointing to such groupings (published in written form or as syllabi) as reference points, to demonstrate a historical trajectory, etc. An alternative approach to constructing and using a so-called "film canon" can be seen through the work of a theatrical film programmer.

While such programmers may refer to familiar canons utilized by film academics and critics, this thesis argues that there is more flexibility in the canon as envisioned by those involved in art house theatrical programming. The audiences of the Austin Film Society (AFS) Cinema and the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, the case studies in this thesis, typically could be described as "cine-literate." This type of audience member would have at least a nominal understanding of film history, may keep lightly abreast of industry news, and perhaps is attuned to new releases and repertory series. The film programmer is presenting or re-presenting films in (new) contexts to interest or educate their cine-literate audiences. While the programmer would have a concern for aesthetic and historical importance when selecting films for a program similar to an academic, the programmer could be described as being less invested in historical narratives when compared to academics. The film programmer works based on an understanding of their community, first and foremost, and adjusts their canonical programming accordingly.

AFS and Drafthouse share the distinction of being two quintessential cinematic institutions of Austin, Texas. AFS was founded in 1985 by now-acclaimed filmmaker Richard Linklater (who continues to serve as Artistic Director) and after many years screening films in various cinema spaces in Austin, the non-profit organization opened its

own cinema in 2017. Alamo Drafthouse Cinema is a chain of cinemas based in Austin with forty-one company- and franchisee-owned theaters across the United States. Founded by Karrie and Tim League in 1997, Drafthouse has distinguished itself for both its full-service dining options provided to patrons from their cinema seats and for its idiosyncratic film programs. Programs are created by both teams within the company itself as well as by their theaters' programmers throughout the country.

Both of these case studies provide me with the opportunity to explore how the idea of a canon is used in an art house theatrical setting. My case studies illustrate how a canon can be utilized as a marketing tool for the programmers at these cinemas, albeit with critical differences. The Alamo Drafthouse leverages its version of a canon via the marketing materials for their Drafthouse Recommends series; Drafthouse builds upon the cinephilia of their audience with films selected for this series. This case study utilizes Luca Guadagnino's 2017 film *Call Me By Your Name* as a point of focus in the series. Through the Drafthouse Recommends series, Drafthouse helps illustrate how film canonization can happen concurrently, upon the release of the film.

While a film canon may also be used for marketing purposes at AFS, cinematic expertise can be seen as helping to fulfill the educational mission of the organization. At AFS, a "traditional" film canon can be understood as a jumping off point for their programming – to both enforce traditionally held beliefs of the canon, but also to encourage their audience to consider other actors, filmmakers, and films could also be considered canonical. As one example amongst many, AFS' 2019 series, "Half Angel: The Essential

Cinema of Jean Arthur," examines how AFS programmers reinterpret and expand their audience's perception of canonical and historical cinema and filmmakers.

The curatorial decisions of the programmers at Drafthouse or AFS Cinema are appealing and compelling aspects of these cinemas, and indeed may attract cine-literate audiences accordingly. Art house cinemas can be places of education in film aesthetics and history, where viewers are given access to a curated world of cinema. "Canonization as Praxis: A Study of Film Programming" focuses upon the work of AFS and Drafthouse film programmers to demonstrate how canons play a role in elevating their film programs, compelling their audiences to turn out for a film and how this work relies upon critics to do so. In creating these dialogues – between audiences, critics, and programmers – film programming allows for and encourages a more dynamic sense of a cinematic canon. Rather than remaining staid and historical, exchanges between these stakeholders create a dynamic process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In her 1993 article, "Loose Canons: Constructing Cultural Traditions Inside and Outside the Academy," scholar Ava Preacher Collins questions the foundation of canons in academia, or even within one stakeholder: "Academics and the academy are not the only, nor the most powerful, nor necessarily even central cultural agents for combating oppression" (88-89). The nuances of these arguments – about the power the academy wields with regards to film canons and subsequently issues of social justice – speak to my interest in studying the places where more people watch films: actual cinemas where you

pay to watch a movie, rather than a screening in a classroom at a college or university. The uneven power dynamics typical of any type of artistic canon are clearly on display via the exhibition space of the audience-oriented art house cinema. The literature under review here provide me with the springboard into the realm of exhibition, because I operate under the assumption that the academy does have a part in shaping these canons, especially in terms of how journalists and critics may adopt academic works in their writing. My project expands these arguments and narratives to explore the discourse of how the work of academics and critics is conveyed by film programmers.

Scholarly Perspectives on Cinematic Canons

This overview of academic and critical discussions on cinematic canons demonstrates the need to explore further the relationship between criticism and programming. Published in 1985, Dr. Janet Staiger's (canonical) text, "The Politics of Film Canon," provides an overview and critique of preexisting methods of canonization within and without the academy. For Staiger, the academy is important in upholding or perpetuating critical notions of canonization. While much of her analysis surrounds the work of critics, she ultimately ends with a call to the academy to consider the types of canons they continue to utilize in their educational practices.

Staiger opens by stating these objectives. She writes, "my project is not to encourage a stance of relativity or political pluralism upon recognizing that all canonical projects are tied into a political activity but rather to make those politics self-evident, to find the political centers of particular enterprises" (Staiger 4). Staiger divides her project

into the following headings: “The Politics of Admission,” reminiscent of a time when there were so few significant movies that the canon was more concerned with what was or was not admitted; “The Politics of Selection,” when there had to be a more selective process for canonizing films due to the increasing quantity of quality films; finally, “The Politics of the Academy,” and how the academy would do well to recognize its position that allows them to discern which films are or are not worth canonizing. Staiger is attempting to illustrate how these politics work so that those in positions of power, in particular, academics or critics, can understand the gravity of their decisions when they make canonical selections. “Competition in academics and the film industry,” Staiger notes, “reinforces canons and canon-making;” academia often compels scholars to make lists and, therefore, distinguish themselves in the film studies field (Staiger 4).

Staiger concludes her article with a call to the academy. While she acknowledges the necessity for scholars to differentiate themselves in the job market with ranking practices, it is necessary to examine the power implications herein. She concludes: “The questions, then, are, what politics do we support? If we wish to eliminate a politics of power, how do we do that? And what does that mean in terms of those films we choose to study and how we study them?” (Staiger 19). Staiger summarizes her argument with this call to action, to consider, based on what she has outlined, how these various politics contribute to the ways in which canons are created and perpetuated. Academics should be aware of the politics they are supporting via the decisions they make about which films to teach and write about, and in these ways, canonize.

In her article, “Loose Canons: Constructing Cultural Traditions Inside and Outside the Academy,” scholar Preacher Collins builds upon Staiger’s thesis, further pushing the necessity of questioning power dynamics involved in canon formation. Preacher Collins questions the presumptive power of the academy, and the responsibility of the academy to elevate more marginalized voices rather than speaking for them. She states: “the political functions of canons may not fully account for their origins, and academic critics are not the sole agents engaged in forming and reforming the canon” (Preacher Collins 89). Preacher Collins highlights the power dynamics at play in selective criteria as these criteria are symptomatic of larger issues of oppression (88). By prioritizing certain voices at the cost of marginalizing others, canons not only perpetuate damaging systems of oppression, but also maintain the significance of certain institutions over others.

Preacher Collins urges academics to consider how and why certain voices, institutions, and stakeholders are even endowed with the power to proclaim particular artists or films more significant than others:

> Any idea of reforming this idea of the canon simply presupposes its power as a pre-existent entity under the auspices of a predominant institution—the academy—which is in fact only one institution among many, with its own specific values that may or may not be taken up by other institutions. Value is fundamentally variable, both within institutions and among them, and any attempt to fix it within narrow traditions in one institution simply does not respect the way that values, texts, and institutions circulate within the culture. (Preacher Collins 101)

The academy is not the only institution at work, and different institutions will have different sets of values with which they assess the objects of canonization. Canons are created for different purposes and with different dynamics in mind. Different priorities create different canons, and these priorities/values can (and perhaps should) change.

Sociologists Michael Patrick Allen and Anne E. Lincoln discuss the pliable nature of canons in their quantitative study on cultural consecration. With a data set of 1,277 films, Allen and Lincoln quantify the consecration of these films based on their inclusion in the American Film Institute's (AFI) list of "100 Greatest Films" as well as the Library of Congress' National Film Registry in order to suggest a "theory of retrospective cultural consecration" (873). To define their terms, they state, "cultural consecration occurs whenever distinctions are imposed that serve to separate individuals and achievements that are worthy of admiration and respect from those that are not" (Allen and Lincoln 872). They describe three types of consecration: professional, critical, and popular. Allen and Lincoln believe that, "contemporaneous cultural consecration does not typically impart the same cultural legitimacy as that derived from retrospective consecration" (875); the AFI list and the National Film Registry are examples of retrospective consecration, where the continued canonical importance of a film helps it to find a place in one (or both) of these lists.

Allen and Lincoln cite works on collective memory as having demonstrated "the cultural representations of public figures and historical events often shift over time in response to changing social conditions as well as the efforts of individuals and groups" (877). Our estimation of a film changes, or can change, over time. How films are perceived

will change particularly with how they are written about, or otherwise commemorated. It is therefore important to examine how the reputations of films are negotiated and subsequently upheld despite these cultural shifts. Allen and Lincoln argue that one of the reasons a film may be eligible for retrospective consecration is because of how it is continually a part of the discourse of film critics and scholars (877). Before listing the findings of their studies, Allen and Lincoln write, "It is likely that film critics and film scholars, who possess both the institutional and rhetorical resources to produce this discourse, are able to shape, and to some extent, the reputations of films and those who produce them" (877). Their study demonstrates the importance of such "reputational entrepreneurs" in the continued consecration of film objects. Allen and Lincoln approach themes underlying Staiger and Collins' theoretical arguments by quantifying the machinations of power at play in the consecration of these films.

In his article, "Loaded Canons: Contemporary Film Canons, Film Studies, and Film Discourse," Professor Jonathan Lupo focuses on the divisions between key stakeholders in discussions of film canonization: critics and scholars. Lupo claims: "while academic Film Studies had clear reasons for wanting to avoid explicit canon building with their own field, this abdication exacerbated clefts in the relationship between journalistic critics and the academy, the latter thereby missing an opportunity to fully contribute to the wider film community" (220). He uses these terms to frame his argument that the film industry, critics, and academics are in disagreement in terms of the use value of canon-making.

He explores the reticence of film studies to canonize films (wherein he also explains how film studies became more interested in cultural studies framework that was less

interested in aesthetics), the general cultural inclination towards prize-giving, and the ultimate theoretical divide between academics and critics. Similar to Preacher Collins, he argues: "In film, the 'power' in determining canonical texts is diffuse; critics, academics, and even the public (who 'vote' via buying tickets) all have a 'say' in how and which films are most valued and ultimately remembered" (Lupo 220). Academia is not the only cultural authority on film; there are many factors at play in the consecration/canonization of film. As Allen and Lincoln demonstrate, these stakeholders will influence the consecration of films.

Lupo provides a history of cinematic canon formation in an effort to demonstrate the divisions between academics, critics, and the industry. He begins by discussing the history of the literary canon and how it is related to the cinematic canon. Lupo cites Staiger in her discussion of the machinations of power in film canons (Lupo 220). He discusses the work of writer Jonathan Rosenbaum, particularly his belief that with the advent of film studies, "the project of canon making [was left] to mainstream critics, and more importantly, to the marketplace" (Lupo 222). Lupo describes the general cultural inclination towards overzealous prize-giving and sees canon-making via list-making as part of that trend (222-223).

This discussion leads him to discuss the list-making of the *Sight and Sound* "Ten Greatest Films of All Time" poll, which is taken every ten years. He remarks that, "while reputable, the poll is too yoked to the legacies of outmoded critical orthodoxies" (Lupo 223). Lupo also explains that there is an incredible diversity in these lists below the top ten ranking: "such figures suggest that the more interesting story is taking place beyond the

top tens' familiar hit parades and in the striking multiplicities of its margins" (223). While the top ten stays more or less the same with each iteration, there is still hope that outside of the top ten, there is more diversity and exploration throughout cinema's offerings; the canon is not necessarily so static. In contrast, Lupo discusses the functionality of the AFI "100 Years/100 Movies" poll released in 1995 in a television special on CBS. Unlike the *Sight and Sound* poll, the AFI surveyed 1,500 film and studio professionals, compared to the 250 critics and filmmakers surveyed by *Sight and Sound* (Lupo 225). The AFI voters were also made to select from a list of four hundred films that they assessed based on a list of six criteria (Lupo 225). Lupo remarks that these strictures forced the voters to consider what they believed to be "great," and allow for "visibility and accessibility," which he calls "fundamental to any film's inclusion into a canon" (225).

Lupo proposes that the National Film Registry offers an apparent solution to the conflict between the various stakeholders in cinematic canon formation (229). Created by the Library of Congress' National Film Preservation Board, the National Film Registry admits 25 films annually, that are deemed "'culturally, historically or aesthetically significant' … These films are not selected as the 'best' American films of all time, but rather as works of enduring importance to American culture. They reflect who we are as a people and as a nation" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). Lupo speculates because of these criteria that the National Film Registry is perhaps "America's most enduring canon," the solution to the ills of the politics and lists and rankings he has been critical of in his article (230).

Two main ideas emerge within this academic literature on film canonization and theory. Staiger and Preacher Collins argue that it is essential to examine the power structures in canon formation. Allen and Lincoln and Lupo demonstrate the ways in which power can be seen as diffuse when creating canons. Placed within this scholarly discourse on canon formation, film programmers proactively grapple with these conflicting power dynamics to uphold and/or challenge ideas of canon. One could argue that programming is the praxis of all of this academic theory.

Movie Theaters and Movie Culture

Even well into the 21st century and despite the advent of an abundance of at-home streaming platforms, art house cinemas remain storied institutions that play vital roles in American film culture. They are spaces that continue to provide enriching, enlightening experiences to their patrons. In Kevin J. Corbett's article "The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television, and Beyond the Substitution Effect," he argues that American culture will never abandon theatrical moviegoing; the activity "holds too much cultural importance" (31). Cinemas provide a significant cultural experience that cannot be eliminated by the changes in the film industry; theaters will find a way to adapt. Barbara Wilinsky's book *Sure Seaters* tracks the evolution – and continued importance – of art house cinemas in the United States. Wilinsky's book is more explicitly focused on art house cinemas and the surrounding socio-cultural implications of such institutions.

According to Wilinsky, art house theaters themselves are not simply businesses, but they are also institutions at work in a large socio-cultural system of leisure and history.

Wilinsky's project seeks "to understand the relationship between alternative film cultures and dominant Hollywood cinema" (10). Wilinsky perceives the art house movement as a cultural moment that crystalizes "the significant role of taste and culture in the postwar United States" (129). She continues that in the postwar era in the U.S. that saw the advent of many such art house cinemas, "Many people in the United States sought ways to distinguish themselves from the growing middle class … Involvement in art house culture offered potential audience members a way to achieve this distinction and shape their identities by being part of something different or alternative" (Wilinsky 129). It is therefore useful to engage with Wilinsky's text while assessing the current iteration of American art house cinemas. They still, in some ways, represent spaces where these ideals of taste and culture are practiced by their audiences. Again, these audience members are a part of what I refer to as a cine-literate population.

Theatrical Film Programming

In an effort to formalize professional philosophies of film programmers, the film magazine *Cineaste* published a compendium of fora that ran in their publication from 2000 to 2011 in *Cineaste on Film Criticism, Programming, and Preservation in the New Millennium*. Such topics include "Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet" and "Repertory Film Programming." The *Cineaste* collection allows for a useful overview on perspectives of varying topics surrounding programming as told by critics and programmers.

In the introduction to the collection, the collection editors Cynthia Lucia and Rahul Hamid describe the cleft between film criticism and programming, not dissimilar to what

Lupo described in his article. They describe the progressive need for film studies to establish the field as reputable in the academic world, which forced a divide between journalists and scholars; this "tendency [gave] rise to incisive, useful theoretical scholarship but also, in some instances, to arcane approaches and impenetrable prose" (Lucia and Hamid 11). They assert that there have always members of both groups as authors and editors in *Cineaste*, and subsequently, "we hope that the volume will be timely and useful to critics, scholars, historians, teachers, students, curators, distributors, programmers, and preservationists—not to mention those artists and technicians who create the cinema we enjoy and study in the first place" (Lucia and Hamid 12). The *Cineaste* book is therefore a useful text for this project that connects the various stakeholders in the film industry as it pertains to this project (critics, scholars, and programmers). The discussions in the fora as published in the *Cineaste* book provide concrete examples of the work of these groups in film criticism, exhibition, and programming.

The work of scholars Felicia Chan and Marijke de Valck can also supplement those in the *Cineaste* volume, as it pertains to film programming. Chan and de Valck both write on programming at film festivals. In her article, "Finding Audiences for Films: Programming in Historical Perspective," de Valck states: "I understand programming foremost as a *cultural* practice, because programming implies a committed handling of cinema as cultural expression and an evaluation of films as artistic accomplishments" (26). De Valck is asserting that programming serves a purpose, to assess and relay the accomplishments of films to audiences. While Chan's article "The international film

festival and the making of a national cinema," is, as its title suggests, examining how notions of "national cinema" are perpetuated with festival programming, she provides an interesting discussion on how programmers can utilize their platforms for (potentially subversive) counterhegemonic programming. She notes that there is a "delicate balance required in satisfying both aims – of appearing to work with the ruling ideology in order to secure funding while attempting to resist its hegemony" (Chan 258). The work of Chan and de Valck demonstrates how programming is a significant cultural practice (as de Valck describes) that can have a societal impact (as Chan describes). Studying the work of programmers in both non-profit and commercial settings validates the significance of the work of these programmers.

METHODS

This project has largely relied upon ethnography and lengthy interviews with current or former staff members at both the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema and the Austin Film Society. The interviews provided me invaluable insight into decision-making at both organizations, including a look into both the formal and informal factors relating to canon formation and theatrical programming. Trade press and industry journals offer important historical and industrial context. Additionally, as Special Programming Apprentice at the AFS Cinema in summer 2019, I was able to observe and experience first-hand the work of the AFS programmers.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Following this introduction, chapter two, "The Commercial Canon: *Call Me By Your Name* and the Business of Discursive Canon Formation at Alamo Drafthouse Cinema" focuses on Alamo Drafthouse Cinema and, in particular, their Drafthouse Recommends series which reflects the organization's affinity for art house fare. The Drafthouse Recommends series is described on their website as "Handpicked films that transcend cinema and need to be experienced by all." My study of Drafthouse's marketing demonstrates how critical reviews can be used to frame the reception of a film. Drafthouse is building an audience of cinephiles with its specialized programming and leveraging this cinephilia in creating its programing. Drafthouse's audience is trained to recognize their brand as trustworthy and therefore, believable purveyors of a film canon. With particular attention to the Drafthouse's approach to programming *Call Me By Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), chapter two discusses the position of Drafthouse as a commercial exhibitor concerned with representing a specific type of cinema to a specific audience, and how that may inform their programming choices, especially with a series so closely tied to its brand.

Chapter three, "The Disruptive Canon: Austin Film Society and Programming Towards an Audience" provides an overview of the programming practices at the Austin Film Society Cinema. AFS programs art house, international, and repertory films at their own cinema alongside the community-based activities such as hosting classes, visiting filmmakers, and operating Austin's public access cable channel. AFS Cinema provides a useful contrast with my discussion of Drafthouse because AFS is a non-profit organization that purports to have a more inherently educational and enriching motivation behind their

programming. Through promotional strategies such as write-ups and introductions for their films, AFS programmers demonstrate the significance of their programmed film. As I learn in my interviews with current and former AFS programmers, the selection of a film for an AFS program implies its significance. Like Drafthouse, the audience knows the selectivity of the AFS programmers indicates the significance of a film.

A brief discussion of the recent AFS series, "Half Angel: The Essential Cinema of Jean Arthur" refracts my analysis of programming practices to illustrate the work of the AFS programmers. As an intern at AFS in summer 2019, I was able to observe the preparations for this series and attended one of the films myself. My discussion of this series explores how film programs can be utilized as a means for reshaping notions of canon. Additionally, the case study as situated in the larger chapter reveals that the AFS programmer may be more inclined to expand upon typically held beliefs of a cinematic canon when selecting films for their programs.

CONCLUSION

This project illustrates that theatrical film programmers offer a more flexible understanding of a cinematic canon, rather than a more traditional (rigid, constant) understanding – in list or syllabus form – of film aesthetics and histories. Alamo Drafthouse Cinema and AFS Cinema both program films that encourage their audiences to expand their understanding of canonical films. By building brand recognition and trust, the audiences at each of these institutions also learn how to make their own value judgments and come to their own conclusions about the films they are being presented here. This

thesis outlines the ways in which understandings of canon throughout academia, criticism, and programming can all inform each other. The theories of academics and critics are enacted in film programs, but of course cinemas benefit from the work of these academics and critics. The case studies of Drafthouse and AFS demonstrate how these theories are brought into a broader audience. This thesis validates the dissemination of theoretical and critical understandings of canon via the art house cinema program.

Chapter Two: The Commercial Canon: Call Me By Your Name *and the Business of Discursive Canon Formation at Alamo Drafthouse Cinema*

Though Alamo Drafthouse Cinema publicizes a number of film series programmed in any of their forty-one theaters across the United States, their Drafthouse Recommends series stands apart. While many of these series or events are closely tied to a theme, the Drafthouse Recommends series does not discriminate. Created in 2013 with the inaugural selection, *Spring Breakers* (2013), Drafthouse Recommends is a series closely related to the branding of the company, simultaneously relying on and building its audience's familiarity with the company, brand, and its taste profile. Importantly, Drafthouse Recommends features only first run films as they are released, whereas other series are often focused on repertory screenings.

According to scholars Michael Patrick Allen and Anne E. Lincoln, cultural consecration is based upon professional, critical, and popular distinctions. For film canons, these categories form the basis for determining the long-term cultural relevancy of a particular title. The Drafthouse Recommends series, however, selects and highlights new films thus ensuring that the ethos of the series is necessarily dynamic, exploring and including newly released films. In screening titles under its Drafthouse Recommends banner series, the company simultaneously establishes the rules for what qualities of a film they would deem canonizable based on their corporate identity and what they would like to highlight as a part of their brand. With a case study of the 2017 film *Call Me By Your Name* and its inclusion in the Drafthouse Recommends series, this chapter explores how Drafthouse is creating and maintaining a cinematic canon through this series.

A HISTORY OF ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE CINEMA

Tim and Karrie League selected Austin, Texas as the headquarters for their fledgling theater chain in 1997; the particular cinephilic attitude and cinematic predilections of Austinites runs through the DNA of the company still today. Drafthouse plays both first run as well as repertory screenings of films – from cult classics to Hollywood classics, or films that are just fun to watch with a theater full of fans. In addition to its idiosyncratic programming, Drafthouse cinemas all have a dine-in theater model. Drafthouse distinguishes itself from similarly modeled theaters with the quality of its food and service, plus their strict rules for their patrons. Before each film at Drafthouse, viewers are reminded that they cannot talk during the film, nor use their phones. While many movie theaters may suggest such niceties, Drafthouse demands it – patrons can be ejected, without a refund, should they not comply with these rules after one warning from a manager. In a recent lecture at the Herb Kelleher Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of Texas at Austin McCombs School of Business, Tim League discussed the intersection of brick-and-mortar movie theaters and streaming.[2] He explained that the Drafthouse is not competing with the fact that moviegoers can stream movies at home – they're competing with any other activity the moviegoers could be doing with their spare time (eating at a

[2] At the time of this lecture on March 10, 2020 (and indeed during the writing of this thesis), Tim League was CEO of Alamo Drafthouse Cinema. On April 30, 2020, Drafthouse announced that League would step into the newly formed role of Executive Chairman, which allows League to focus on "creative initiatives" for the brand. Shelli Taylor became CEO on May 1, 2020 ("Announcing Shelli Taylor as New Alamo Drafthouse CEO…").

restaurant, meeting friends at a bar, etc.) Essentially, the moviegoing experience at Drafthouse allows for all of these cultural experiences within the venue of a cinema.

Drafthouse has a distinct corporate identity that is recognizable to its patrons, in contrast to other major American theater chains such as AMC Theaters or Regal Cinemas. Drafthouse leverages this distinctive corporate identity to cultivate their audience's engagement. Many of the repertory screenings at Drafthouse fall under one of their Signature Series, which may also have a genre focus or a special meal pertaining to the film. Drafthouse Recommends is just one of twenty-one series listed on the Drafthouse webpage for series that play regularly in Austin. While other Drafthouse series have a more specialized focus (such as the self-explanatory Terror Tuesday or Weird Wednesday, plus Fist City (action movies) or Afternoon Tea (period pieces)), the Drafthouse Recommends series is more of a generalizable canonical list, in the same vein as the aforementioned *Sight and Sound* poll list or the AFI "100 Greatest Films." Drafthouse Recommends is an opportunity for the chain to put its stamp on a film, leveraging the trust the audience has in the chain/brand to encourage regular visits to the cinema for curated fare. With such uniquely programmed series, Drafthouse has become known for their customized, curated programming.

Drafthouse Cinemas are a mix of company-owned and franchisee-owned theaters. As explained to me in my interview with RJ LaForce, Director of Programming for Austin and San Antonio, TX for Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, corporate headquarters sends all of their cinemas set packages of first run and specialty programming, although each cinema (particularly franchisee cinemas) are only mandated to select around three of such

programs. It is my understanding that franchisee-owned theaters program their content themselves, though they may make selections based on what corporate is offering (and subsequently focusing corporate advertising.) However, it behooves a franchisee to program series titles when they are being marketed by Drafthouse corporate – especially a series such as Drafthouse Recommends that is so closely tied to the brand (LaForce). Drafthouse markets itself as a place for movie lovers through its unique and specialized programming and embodied in the experience of attending a film screening at a Drafthouse location. Drafthouse programs are specially created for their different theaters in different markets to build brand recognition and trust with their patrons.

In a July 2017 feature in *Texas Monthly* on Tim and Karrie League and Drafthouse, Dan Solomon frames his article around the fact that although cinema ticket sales have been declining in the United States, showings at Drafthouse are "consistently selling out." The founders themselves agree that Drafthouse offers something unique; in a February 2008 interview with the Leagues in *Texas Monthly*, Karrie League states: "There are actually lots of cinemas around the country that serve beer and food. The difference comes from Tim's creativity in programming" ("Tim and Karrie League"). This level of success speaks to the significance of loyalty to Drafthouse, but more broadly, the significance of "art house" cinemas as a site for canon formation.[3]

Solomon's article also tracks the development of Drafthouse as a business – from Tim and Karrie expanding locally on their own before franchising the intellectual property

[3] While Karrie League is referenced as an important part of the Drafthouse business and brand, Tim League is the focus of the Solomon article as the mastermind behind the cinema and their programs. Therefore, when I refer to "League," unless otherwise noted, I am referring to Tim.

for Drafthouse, which led to a legal battle between the Leagues and their business partners to whom they had franchised the rights, to the ultimate settlement of Tim taking the reins as CEO, "and everybody on board with the same mission: to build a national company, using the 'make going to the movies an event' concept that League had developed." Drafthouse's commitment to "make going to the movies an event," support Solomon's assessment of League as a contemporary Hollywood showman, drawing parallels between League and Marcus Loew, the movie theater mogul of the early 1900s. Drafthouse is finding ways to continuously bring their audiences to the cinema. Drafthouse makes moviegoing an event by creating an experience suitable to their patrons' recreational interests, chiefly by providing quality programming, food, drinks, and service.

Given that some of the factors Drafthouse may look to when researching locations for new theaters might be the number of craft breweries in a city, or the average household education level, these recreational interests are closely aligned with the socio-cultural status of the prospective patron (League). Drafthouse offers an ideal illustration of what Barbara Wilinsky speaks to in her discussion of the growth of art house cinemas in the United States as important sites for such negotiations of one's socio-cultural status (82). Though Drafthouse is a mainstream movie theater, they have plentiful specialty programming that allows for/encourages expression of such tastes. The Drafthouse Recommends series crystallizes this negotiation of art house versus commercial: the series demarcates films that a Drafthouse audience member ought to see in order to take part in the ideals of the brand.

As Solomon concludes in his *Texas Monthly* article, "Maybe what Tim League is franchising isn't actually his movie theater but his love of movies. 'We're trying to build a community around like-minded weirdos,' he says, 'who just love storytelling and love movies.'" Thus, according to Solomon as well as League, Drafthouse distances itself from the business side of moviegoing and rather focuses on the fun and artistic integrity of their films. Besides the cinemas and their attendant series and events, other members of "The Alamo Family" include the Fantastic Fest, a genre film festival held each fall in Austin; Birth.Movies.Death., a blog about movies; American Genre Film Archive, a non-profit for the preservation and distribution of genre films; and NEON, a distributor (which absorbed its predecessor Drafthouse Films in 2016, and recently made Oscar history when Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* (2019) became the first film not in the English language to win the Best Picture Academy Award) (Solomon).

As these initiatives indicate, the Drafthouse appears to be a cinephile's dream. League has said: "[I'm] a firm believer in the fact that film fans continue to make decisions to either stay in or go out. And people have always wanted and still want to get out of the home" (Toumarkine). It's not just about staying in or going out or how much it may cost: people who love movies will continue to go to see movies in theaters. Drafthouse Recommends is another example of one of the strategies Drafthouse employs to keep moviegoing compelling and engaging. Drafthouse has cultivated a trust in their brand that means that patrons will understand a "Drafthouse Recommends" film as one they must see.

CINEPHILIA, CRITICS, AND THE CONCURRENT CANONIZATION OF *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

In 2017, there were seven total Drafthouse Recommends picks: *Get Out* (2017), *Raw* (2016), *It Comes at Night* (2017), *The Big Sick* (2017), *The Florida Project* (2017), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Call Me By Your Name* (2017). *Call Me By Your Name,* premiered in January 2017 at the Sundance Film Festival and was theatrically released in November 2017. Speaking personally, *Call Me By Your Name* became a bit of an obsession; I saw it in theaters four times over the course of four months (it's not uncommon for me to see a movie twice in theaters, but four times is a lot). While this was initially why I was drawn to the film for this chapter, it also became a useful case study to explore how a film may be concurrently canonized upon its release.

With this film specifically, cinephilia and nostalgia have factored into its canonization. Due to the subject matter of the film, reviewers often invoke their own memories when discussing the film, pointing towards the emotionality possible in canonization. By engaging with personal preferences, perspectives, and experiences, Drafthouse is helping to shape the cinephilic sensibilities of their audience, and therefore their audience's understanding of canon. Our histories and memories are inevitably tied up in our understanding of cinephilia; there are likely personal reasons – just as there may be aesthetic reasons – that viewers are drawn to certain films.

Call Me By Your Name's inclusion into the Drafthouse Recommends series was likely influenced by several factors. For one, the context in which early critics and programmers saw the film – escaping to warm, calm Northern Italy on screen amidst a

cold, snowy Sundance in January 2017 – almost definitely contributed to the positive reception to the film upon its release in November 2017. Second, many critics point to the film's nostalgic mode as a core aspect of its appeal. Because the film is about the first (queer) love of a young man, the viewer is drawn into the protagonist Elio's state of mind, and inevitably one is found reflecting on one's own experiences. Due to the fact that the film takes place in the past (in the summer of 1983), the viewer is perhaps able to detach themselves from the present, and to slip into their own past and to map their own history onto the characters and setting.

After its Sundance premiere in January 2017, *Call Me By Your Name* had a successful domestic release, amassing $18,095,701 domestically and $23,791,894 internationally (Box Office Mojo). It maintains a 95% critical aggregate rating on Rotten Tomatoes and a Metascore of 93 on Metacritic. Based on the novel of the same name by André Aciman (published in 2007), *Call My By Your Name* tells the story of Elio Perlman, the son of a professor whose family summers in Northern Italy, and his relationship with Oliver, a visiting graduate student. Though the novel explores different time periods in Elio and Oliver's relationship, the film focuses on the summer of 1983 (also a slight temporal change from the book) and an encounter the following winter. The film follows Elio throughout the few weeks in the summer when Oliver is staying with his family. Elio lazes around, transcribing music, reading, sleeping, swimming, writing, and going out dancing. Eventually, Elio and Oliver are able to communicate their feelings for each other and subsequently consummate their relationship and spend as much time together as they can before Oliver returns to the United States. Elio is left in the wake of the relationship. In the

emotional climax of the film, Elio's father gives a moving speech about the nature of love and the importance of holding onto one's feelings. The film concludes the following winter, after Elio has spoken to Oliver on the phone and learned that Oliver is to be married. As the credits begin, the camera lingers on Elio looking into a fire, silently crying; the final shot of the film is Elio looking directly into the camera.

An exploration of the critical reception of *Call Me By Your Name* demonstrates how the nostalgic themes of the film contributed to its success. Scholars Malte Hagener and Marijke de Valck connect nostalgia and cinephilia in their article "Cinephilia in Transition." They write, "Many film scholars must consider their own enthusiasm for certain films, directors, or genres as being terribly estranged from the proper way of thinking, talking, and writing about cinema" (Hagener and de Valck 27). Hagener and de Valck are suggesting that scholars (and, I would add, critics) may be reluctant to be enthusiastic or to show their true feelings about a filmmaker or film because it might make them seem less serious. However, critic Richard Schickel similarly noted that, "movies are a sentimental medium – more so than a lot of us care to admit when we are draped in our critical-history finery" (14). It can be difficult to admit – especially when one is attempting to occupy a space of cultural authority – that one's emotions can become entangled with one's thoughts and feelings about a film. But, Hagener and de Valck argue, "cinephilia allows one to follow one's libidinal instincts while simultaneously being taken seriously" (27). Cinephilia is an adequate if not welcomed space in which to embrace these instincts.

Drafthouse provides a model of a cinema built on cinephilia – where the audience is unabashedly invited to be enthusiastic about the cinematic medium and moviegoing.

While the viewer experience at Drafthouse is typically mediated by strict "no talking" and "no texting" policies, the viewer is still encouraged to enjoy themselves by being offered food and drink in their seat. Drafthouse also supplies alternate spaces such as their Movie Parties, where particular activities are encouraged, when appropriate (i.e. singing or quoting along, wearing film-related paraphernalia, eating film-related food). Therefore, *Call Me By Your Name* provides a case study for understanding how Drafthouse wants their patrons to embrace their cinephilia via a personal, nostalgia-filled film. Hagener and de Valck write, "cinephilia is indeed characterized by a constant double-movement between the biographical and the theoretical, the singular and the general, the fragment and the whole, the incomplete and the complete, the individual and the collective" (27).

Call Me By Your Name expresses this ideology, as highlighted in the following critical reviews. The film unites the biographical (with the plot and subject matter of the film) and the theoretical (directing, writing, performances); the singular example of a generalized/shared experience, the fragment or incomplete of perhaps one's own experiences with the whole/complete storyline of the filmed characters; the individual experience of the viewer in the collective of moviegoers. With the Drafthouse Recommends title associated with the film, Drafthouse is codifying the type of enjoyment one can expect as a patron an Alamo Drafthouse Cinema.

Likely because of the subject matter of the film, longing and nostalgia were invoked in the discourse surrounding the film. Drafthouse published a press release when selecting *Call Me By Your Name* as its final Drafthouse Recommends pick of 2017. The release reads: "We've fallen for it, and we think you will too, so we're proud to make *Call Me By*

Your Name our final Drafthouse Recommends selection of 2017, joining the ranks of *Get Out, The Florida Project,* and *The Big Sick*." *Call Me By Your Name* is presumed important, connected to these other titles that the audience may recognize. The copy also notes the involvement of "legendary filmmaker James Ivory" who adapted the script for the film (and eventually won an Oscar for it), expecting the reader to be familiar with Ivory's work. This press release then basically gives a bulleted list of why this film is worth seeing as a Drafthouse Recommends title: "Breakthrough performances" citing the work of stars Hammer and Chalamet; "One of the world's greatest filmmakers" reminding you who Luca Guadagnino is and that he is "at the peak of his power"; and with dramatic flourish, the appeal: "A passionate, nostalgic emotional journey: *Call Me By Your Name* burrows a channel deep into your soul, excavating the first intoxicating pangs of first love. You'll feel this movie long after you leave the theater" ("Our Last Drafthouse Recommends Title…"). I am intrigued by such flowery yet forceful language.

The *Call Me By Your Name* page on the Drafthouse website features select pull-quotes from three reviews: in *The A.V. Club* by A. A. Dowd, *IndieWire* by David Ehrlich, and *RogerEbert.com* by Brian Tallerico. The content of these reviews echoed the key points made in the argument for selecting the film for Drafthouse Recommends in the announcement of the film as a pick for the series. Both Ehrlich and Tallerico's reviews were published in January 2017, after *Call Me By Your Name* premiered at Sundance. Dowd's review was published to coincide with the film's initial domestic release date in November 2017. One key similarity in these reviews is the way that they highlight the

acting – namely, Chalamet's performance, given that he a "newcomer," and the genuine portrayal of heartbreak – relating this to nostalgic viewings of the film.

Some of the reviews refer to other work of the actors to remind the reader how they might be familiar with the stars of the film. Dowd draws parallels between Chalamet's performance and Saoirse Ronan's performance in *Lady Bird* (2017), a film in which Chalamet also appears: "Here, [Chalamet] conveys a relatable mix of performative self-confidence and transparent self-consciousness, capturing the embryonic emotional state of late adolescence nearly as expertly as Saoirse Ronan did in that complementary coming-of-age triumph [*Lady Bird*]." Ehrlich references Chalamet's previous film work – "keeping the promise he showed in 'Miss Stevens' [2017] last September." When praising Hammer's previous film work, he reminds us of *The Social Network* (2010) rather than any number of maligned films Hammer had appeared in between 2010 and 2017, including, but not limited to, *Mirror, Mirror* (a non-Disney live-action iteration of Snow White; 2012)*, The Lone Ranger* (Disney's infamous blockbuster flop; 2013), and *The Birth of a Nation* (an overhyped movie that was famously purchased by (Fox) Searchlight Pictures for $17.5 million at Sundance in 2016 that later became mired in controversy when director Nate Parker was accused of sexual assault). Tallerico spends a paragraph specifically praising the physicality of Chalamet's performance: "Watch the way he shrinks or plays at being a callous teen in early scenes and then watch as his body literally responds to the passion and love he's feeling. He'll dance his way into a room, or bound up a flight of steps. And those eyes—from how they reflect his insecurity by often aiming down in early scenes to the way they will literally break your heart in the final ones." It makes sense that

Drafthouse would highlight the co-stars' performances in their press copy for the film: Chalamet was, at the time, relatively new to Hollywood, and Hammer had struggled for critical and popular success.

The key takeaway of these reviews is the sentiment of the movie, the yearning, the nostalgia; how it makes you feel and what it makes you remember. The way that Drafthouse highlights this sense of remembrance is a calculated move in their promotion of the film. Dowd appeals directly to the reader's own memories: "Graced with beautiful landscapes, bodies, and language, *Call Me By Your Name* has the glow of romantic wish-fulfillment: Imagine, it says, if the older, unobtainable object of your affection—viewed from a distance, just beyond reach, as Hammer is so often filmed here—actually reciprocated that affection." The film allows the viewer to be swept into a fantasy for two hours, alongside Elio. Ehrlich says something similar ("the raw energy of trying to feel someone out without touching them") and declares, "*Call Me By Your Name* is a full-bodied film that submits all of its beauties to the service of one simple truth: The more we change, the more we become who we are." Ehrlich references here a literary metaphor featured in the film, aligning our consumption of the film with Elio's journey within the film. Tallerico's review is perhaps the most emotional, ending with:

> Many of us have only learned to love ourselves when we are loved by another. "Call Me By Your Name" is a breathtaking love story, but it is also about a young boy figuring out not only who he is but how to love that person. It is unforgettable on every level, the kind of film that has the power to move and inspire. It is art of the highest caliber, and Sundance was lucky this year to have it.

Tallerico's laudatory review also proposes that the film is an artistic achievement that must be universally acknowledged. What is clear in each of the reviews is how much the writer connected with the film, and how they felt compelled to share that sentiment with their readers.

When announcing the film as a Drafthouse Recommends selection, the copy reads: "*Call Me By Your Name* burrows a channel deep into your soul, excavating the first intoxicating pangs of first love. You'll feel this movie long after you leave the theater." Each of these reviews selected to be displayed on the Drafthouse website demonstrate the nostalgic feelings of first love that they believe will compel their viewers. Key to enjoying this film is engaging with the nostalgic time/place it embodies. As Dowd says, part of one's enjoyment of the film may be about the fantasy of imagining that one's object of affection actually returned the affection. And Elio's father so gently tells him at the end of the film to embrace and not forget his heartbreak, the viewer is allowed to experience the same affirmation and closure that Elio is granted. As a Drafthouse Recommends pick, *Call Me By Your Name* is promoted by Drafthouse as a product of notable artists (Guadagnino, Ivory) with compelling performances (Chalamet). Drafthouse calls this film a "passionate, nostalgic journey." These claims are all corroborated by the critical reviews Drafthouse includes in their press copy on the film. With these rhetorical moves, Drafthouse is engaging the nostalgic, cinephilic inclinations of their patrons.

INSIDE THE DRAFTHOUSE: DRAFTHOUSE RECOMMENDS AND CANONIZATION

In comparison to other Drafthouse programming, the Drafthouse Recommends series directly references some form of "best of" or film canonization; its role as a definitive, and well marketed, list of films exemplifies and amplifies the Drafthouse brand. As I cited in my introduction, de Valck refers to film festival programming as a "*cultural* practice" (26); this definition is helpful to consider in light of the programming practices at Drafthouse. Indeed, the act of programming a film is a decision that contributes to the conceptualizations/understandings of culture. It is an act that lays the groundwork for the tools that one uses to shape one's socio-cultural outlook. League has stated that he feels Drafthouse is a "hybrid" with "one foot in the art house world and one in the commercial, but our guiding principles are those of the art house" (Blair). Drafthouse Recommends is also illustrative as it is both a programming tool and a marketing tool. Although *Call Me By Your Name* was exhibited alongside other first-run films, the film programmers were able to elevate it – and garner larger audiences – with the "Drafthouse Recommends" title.

Bestowing the title of "Drafthouse Recommends" to a film simultaneously ascribes value to the film itself but also elevates the institution that bestows this particular value. Ava Preacher Collins describes the creation of a canon as "selective remembrance," and notes that "Re-collection invests the collected artifact with value (it is worth remembering and saving), but it also bestows a cultural authority on the agency or institution engaged in re-collecting" (89). As a result of the success of the film, the corresponding institution – as in, Drafthouse "re-collecting" the film in Drafthouse Recommends – may also be invested with value in the form of cultural capital. Because in the subsequent history of the film,

should it persist in history or in canons over time, it may also be regarded as having been a part of this grouping.

Drafthouse is fully aware of the implications of associating the series so closely to their brand, and it is formatted and programmed accordingly. As the Director of Programming for Austin and San Antonio, TX for Drafthouse, R.J. LaForce oversees the theaters in this geographical area, coordinates with scheduling and booking departments, and collaborates with national programming and Drafthouse Recommends working groups. When I asked if LaForce was familiar with *Call Me By Your Name* as a Drafthouse Recommends title in particular, he was able to recount the story of selecting this film for the series. LaForce and Kayla Pugh, now Senior Director of First Run Strategy at Drafthouse, saw the film at Sundance in January 2017 and decided that it ought to be a Drafthouse title. LaForce said:

> [I]magine being in the middle of winter in Utah, in a ski resort town. Like just covered in layers, sitting and standing in line in this heated tent to get into a theater. You go in. And the movie you watch is set in the summer in Northern Italy. It seriously just transported us.

LaForce said that he and Pugh continued to talk about the film over the next few days of the festival, eventually realizing, and telling League, that the film should be a Drafthouse Recommends pick: "[Pugh] puts it on Tim League's radar, like we have to make this a Drafthouse Recommends if we can. And Tim said, immediately, 'Yes, Drafthouse Recommends. I trust your judgment.' And that's how it was, back in 2017. Like, that's how the process was – it was almost nonexistent."

LaForce continued: “we knew because of the critical reception that happened at Sundance that the critics were going to love it. It was also a movie that personally touched us, and then also, the other aspect of Drafthouse Recommends that we want to focus on is not just getting behind movies that we know critics are going to like – we want to get behind it for something else.” The programmers were drawn to how personally touching the film was – as were many of the critics who wrote about the film. In terms of the “something else” for this film, LaForce said that it was Chalamet’s performance that drew them in. Indeed, this film could be called Chalamet’s break-out role, and it supplied him with an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor. This lax process is in contrast with the current multi-step multi-committee system that is ostensibly more concerned with how these selections can affect the perception of the Drafthouse brand.

LaForce made the connection between the Drafthouse Recommends title and the series as a canon. He said, “Drafthouse Recommends to us – it’s a branding. So, it’s basically a way of us getting ahead and I guess it’d be – it’s funny – I guess it is a form of canonization, but it’s *present* canonization. So, it’s actually the opposite of what canonized – it may not have a shelf life, but in that moment. It can *feel* canon.” The films selected for this series are so remarkable in their present moment that Drafthouse opts to put their brand name onto their promotion of the film. The current Drafthouse Recommends selection process includes three rounds of selection as described in a series of question by LaForce: “is it a movie that we think should be a Drafthouse Recommends … do we feel like we’re going to get bookings for this … how can we market it.” This more formalized process is in contrast to what LaForce described of the selection of *Call Me By Your Name*, which

was more of an organic feeling that League entrusted to his programmers. This series of questions/tests that are now used to vet a Drafthouse Recommends title ensures the company will yield success – both in terms of finances and credibility of their branding.

LaForce commented that putting a film in the series may give the company some amount of leverage when booking the film with a distributor. By including the film in the series, the company and the distributor enter into more of a collaboration: "at that point it doesn't become buyer/seller. At that point it becomes co-promoters" (LaForce). LaForce noted that *Call Me By Your Name* did not do well in its first week of release. Its American distributor, Sony Pictures Classics, is known for having a more traditional, conservative release strategy. They tend to focus on appealing to a stalwart art house audience (typically an older audience) because they are steady and reliable. LaForce remarked on this oversight in marketing: "what [Sony Pictures Classics has] done [is] missed an entire young audience that should see that movie and will want to see that movie. But we realized – we got some people out, not a ton for that first week, and that movie just kept having legs and getting bigger and bigger and bigger." By putting the Drafthouse Recommends title onto the film, Drafthouse would be able to extend the audience of the film. As the film was associated with the branding of Drafthouse Recommends – which is, as I've explained, perceived to be fun, film-loving, and typically younger – Drafthouse was able to bring this film to their audience's attention.

According to *Business Insider, Call Me By Your Name* earned $36,900 per theater on average at Drafthouse compared to $11,000 per theater on average nationally (Guerraiso). LaForce discussed the metrics used to measure the success of a Drafthouse

Recommends title: "we try to be a higher circuit-rank than our average on Drafthouse Recommends movies." Circuits refer to each theater chain. As in, Drafthouse would want to do better than other national chains, such as AMC or Regal. He continued, "For something like *Jojo Rabbit* [a September/October 2019 Drafthouse Recommends pick], we better be a top-5 circuit on that, nationally" (LaForce). When a film is ranked in the top-5 national circuit, it is performing comparatively better at Drafthouse than at other theater chains (circuits). LaForce also detailed the importance of market share on films selected for the series – they would want to have something around "6% of the box office of this movie nationwide, that's huge. So, it is numbers-based, but it's malleable title-to-title. But basically, Drafthouse Recommends the main metric is we do better than we do on our average new releases." LaForce indicates here that the numbers they would want for each film will depend on the film itself; they are aware that they can only expect certain numbers from certain films.

This understanding of the possibilities of or limits to success on certain films could be attributed to the understanding Drafthouse has of its audiences. Intriguingly, LaForce indicated that he saw the Drafthouse audience as bifurcated into two groups: "I think we're cultivating two audiences … Terror Tuesday and Weird Wednesday have cultivated this type of 'non-film snob cinephiles' and the others, like the broad titles are cultivating this audience that just wants to see movies in theaters and wants that experience, period." Even though Drafthouse appeals to niche audiences with their specialized series, there is also a general, cinephilic crowd that enjoys that aspect of the Drafthouse brand. LaForce stated

that: “our audience has that trust in us, Drafthouse Recommends means something to them.”

I asked specifically about the various stakeholders and groups that would contribute to a film’s success; just because a film is playing at the cinema does not mean it will earn an audience. LaForce responded, “a movie can be good, you can program it and promote it, nobody comes out, it’s done. Specifically, with the Drafthouse Recommends program, that is almost never happened. Now, I don’t know if that has to do with us thinking far ahead about the moving having to be successful, but I think it has to do with the fact that we’re going to get our audience out.” He is indicating that because of the more intensive process now in place for these films, it is less likely that it won’t do well (or, more likely that it will do well). As indicated by the per screen numbers for *Call Me By Your Name*, it would be safe to assume that it is *because* of the Drafthouse Recommends title that a film may perform better financially and may even become canonical (to the Drafthouse audience at least) in the process.

THE PERSISTENCE OF *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

Drafthouse’s business practices demonstrate a certain cinephilia, thereby asserting its right to create a canon of films through its programming. In its publicity for the Drafthouse Recommends title *Call Me By Your Name*, the cinema chain highlighted the nostalgia featured in the film in an effort to make a personal appeal to its audience. In bestowing the Drafthouse Recommends title to this film, Drafthouse reflected critical reception at the time and elevates a film that was already receiving praise. Drafthouse

inserted itself into this narrative, refracted the words of key critics in explaining their selection, and included itself in a larger cultural narrative surrounding a quality film, therefore asserting the authority of its brand.

The concurrent canonization of *Call Me By Your Name* is evident in its critical and awards success. Metacritic creates an aggregated list of how many times a film appears in a critic's year-end top ten list; for 2017, *Call Me By Your Name* was ranked third behind *Get Out* (#1) and *Lady Bird* (#2) (Dietz). *Call Me By Your Name* appeared in first place in 31 lists (*Get Out* appeared as #1 in 36; *Lady Bird* in 18) (Dietz). The film was ultimately nominated for four Oscars – Best Picture, Best Actor (Chalamet), Best Adapted Screenplay (Ivory), and Best Original Song (Sufjan Stevens) – and won Best Adapted Screenplay. This awards attention contributed to the persistence of the film in the zeitgeist.

There is also constant talk of a sequel film; in November 2019, Aciman published a sequel to his novel. It is clear from the promotion surrounding the release of the sequel that the production and release of *Call Me By Your Name* may have propelled Aciman to write the sequel to his novel (Harris). Presumably had the film not been so successful, a sequel to the novel may not have been considered. In April 2020, the sequel film was effectively confirmed when Guadagnino revealed he had been working with potential screenwriters (D'Alessandro). It would appear as though many people involved in *Call Me By Your Name* have continued to experience success in part due to the persistence of the film in cultural conversations. Chalamet, for one, has continued to appear in high-profile films – most recently Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) and soon he will star in Wes Anderson's *The French Dispatch* (2020) and Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* (2020). This

continued success and presence in the industry and its press as an exemplary of the way the film has become canonized.

While there are now plenty of other platforms outside of movie theaters where one can peruse "curated" content – namely, Criterion Channel (and FilmStruck before it), Kanopy, Mubi, and, of course, Netflix – movie theaters persist as reliable locales for programming films. By naming a film to the Drafthouse Recommends title, the moviegoer is encouraged to partake in this viewing experience specifically at the Drafthouse theaters. This helps drive brand loyalty and, of course, business. Drafthouse is now attempting to use this trust in their brand with their newly released Season Pass program. For $19.99 a month, members can see an unlimited number of movies at any Drafthouse cinema. Though the program had been in beta testing in different markets for months, it was released to the public in January 2020. LaForce remarked, "my hope, always [as] a programmer, with any moviegoer is for them to go outside their comfort zone" and with the Season Pass in particular that allows for unlimited access to Drafthouse.

By building trust in its brand through programs such as Drafthouse Recommends, Drafthouse helps to create audiences for their films and programs, and to extend their influence in the theatrical moviegoing market. With the Season Pass program, passholders have free range to partake in Drafthouse's programming. Season Pass effectively gives the filmgoers a financial incentive to trust the Drafthouse programmers; in most markets a passholder would break even by going to see at least two movies a month. Perhaps Season Pass would incite further success in the Drafthouse series and their corresponding canons and aesthetics. Season Pass would ideally encourage a passholder to visit the cinema even

more often, and to therefore achieve the brand's goal of growing their base of cinephile fans.

Chapter Three: The Disruptive Canon: *Austin Film Society and Programming Towards an Audience*

In March 2019, trade journal *Variety* published a cover story feature entitled "Inside Indie Movie Theaters' Battle to Survive." Brett Lang and Matt Donnelly describe the plight of indie movie theaters, struggling to compete in a changing exhibition landscape; they write: "Confronted with aging audiences, competition from streaming services and theater chains boasting recliner seats and other amenities, many of these exhibitors balance precariously on a knife edge between popping more popcorn and being forced to turn off the marquee lights." Lang and Donnelly discuss how some of these theaters have explored funding options such as transforming into non-profit organizations or crowdfunding much-needed renovations, or how an entertainment chain such as Texas-based Cinergy not only functions as a movie theater, but also incorporates other forms of entertainment (bowling, escape rooms) to diversify their revenue streams. Ultimately, Lang and Donnelly are primarily concerned with the financial struggles of such independent theaters.

Professional association Art House Convergence responded to the article by posting a comment on the online version of the *Variety* article, a commentary which they also expanded upon on their website and sent in an email to their own listserv/mailing list. Art House Convergence provides networking, seminar, and conference events for their members, and to advocate for art house exhibition. In their message, Alison Kozberg, Managing Director, and Makenzie Peecook, Conference Manager asserted the need to look beyond the financial significance of such theaters: "These vibrant theaters demonstrate that audiences everywhere appreciate collective viewing and the public square. Art houses are

going to keep bringing people together, showing incredible films, and facilitating challenging conversations – that's far more than just keeping the lights on." Kozberg and Peecook's Art House Convergence-backed rebuke of Lang and Donnelly's *Variety* article indicates the tension between small, community-focused cinemas and national theater chains.

In providing the venue for such exchanges and discussions, art house cinemas function almost as museums, with curated content. The curatorial decisions made by the programmers are telling a story of cinematic aesthetics, criticism, and history. Canon would presumably be a factor – there is almost always a presumed pantheon of canonical words in any art form. Art house cinemas, such as the Austin Film Society Cinema, are not concerned with competing financially with national theater chains – their missions (and therefore their programming) are rather focused on the experiences they are providing to their patrons.

THE AUSTIN FILM SOCIETY AND ITS CINEMA

The Austin Film Society (AFS) was founded in 1985 by filmmaker Richard Linklater. In his book, *Austin to ATX: The Hippies, Pickers, Slackers, and Geeks Who Transformed the Capital of Texas*, journalist and historian Joe Nick Patoski provides a history of AFS, the jewel of the Austin film scene. Patoski tracks the history of Linklater and AFS, paying homage to spiritual predecessors of AFS, such as Cinema40 and CinemaTexas, two film societies that were established on the University of Texas' campus (184-185). CinemaTexas was established by UT film students including Louis Black and

Nick Barbaro, who then co-founded the alternative weekly newspaper the *Austin Chronicle* as well as the South by Southwest Festival (Patoski 181). Though Linklater was not a student at UT, he would attend films on campus and when he and cinematographer Lee Daniel started AFS, they would screen films at the Dobie Theater on campus (Patoski 180). Patoski reviews other notable film figures in Austin, such as directors Terrence Malick and Wes Anderson, who would attend AFS screenings; directors Robert Rodriguez, Mike Judge, Guillermo del Toro, and Quentin Tarantino who all worked or lived in Austin at some point; Linklater's longtime editor Sandra Adair; and my interviewee Chale Nafus, who taught Linklater at Austin Community College, and later worked as lead programmer at AFS. AFS and Linklater are framed as through lines in the history of film and cinema in Austin.

Clearly, Alamo Drafthouse Cinema is also an important player in the Austin film scene. The ostensible difference between Drafthouse and AFS is that Drafthouse is a for-profit business, while AFS is a non-profit organization. While both cinemas are ingrained in this film-loving culture, their programming choices indicate where they diverge. As discussed in chapter two, Drafthouse programs first run films and then numerous series that tend to be focused on the pleasure of watching movies with a roomful of people (especially with regards events such as the Movie Parties, Champagne Cinema, or Terror Tuesdays and Weird Wednesdays).

AFS also plays some first run features, though these films tend to be "smaller," from art house or boutique distributors or, at times, directly from the directors themselves. There may be more movies from the festival circuit, maybe not even in English, rather than

the new blockbuster that would start playing at Drafthouse. AFS "Signature Series" include Avant Cinema, with cutting edge, avant garde films, such as the work of Stan Brakhage; Homo Arigato, a selection of queer films such as Pedro Almodóvar's *Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del montón* (1980); Lates, described as "The new cult film canon," with films such as the West German weird *Der Fan* (1982); and Newly Restored, which recently included Susan Sontag's *Duet for Cannibals* (1969). Nevertheless, Drafthouse and AFS seemed to have shared a mutually beneficial relationship over the years: another one of my interviewees, Lars Nilsen, worked as a programmer at Drafthouse for sixteen years before coming to AFS in 2013, AFS showed their films for many years at various Drafthouse locations throughout Austin before opening their own two-screen cinema in 2017, and recently, Drafthouse/the Leagues donated old theater seats to AFS for a much-needed upgrade. AFS and Drafthouse also both offer their locations for satellite screenings during the South by Southwest Film Festival, a testament to both organizations' involvement in the local creative and film culture.

AFS' mission states: "The Austin Film Society empowers our community to make, watch, and love film and creative media" ("Code of Conduct"). AFS achieves this mission with screenings and events at its Cinema, in addition to the services provided by its Austin Public media studio and Austin Studios media production complex. Not only can artists and filmmakers work in these spaces, but AFS also provides workshops and artist trainings and intensives to cultivate talent. At the two-screen cinema, AFS will play around ten distinct titles each week. While the majority of these films will be part of their repertory series, there will always be a handful of new releases each week. Many of these titles are

accompanied by introductions from programmers or are followed by Q&A sessions with visiting filmmakers, actors, or other talent. At the time of my interviews (autumn 2019), the AFS programming team was comprised of Holly Herrick, Head of Film & Creative Media; Lars Nilsen, Lead Film Programmer; and Lisa Dreyer, Programming Coordinator.

Every film receives a carefully crafted write-up on the AFS website, released every two months as the bimonthly calendar is announced. While some more recognizable selections may speak for themselves, other more obscure or lesser-known films may benefit from contextualization. Write-ups on the website or in a film program are typically accompanied by relevant pull quotes from critics, writers, or tastemakers, again, selected by the AFS programmers and marketing team to adequately highlight the merits of a film to the AFS audiences. My interviews reveal that at AFS, canonization is rarely a factor in creating these programs. It is the job of the programmer to have extensive and experienced taste. I have previously cited Marijke de Valck's notation of film programming in a festival setting as a "*cultural* practice" (26). In the cinematic setting of AFS, programming is an impactful cultural exercise, influencing aesthetics, history, and audiences alike. Patrons of AFS are entrusting the programming team to present them with an engaging, and at times, challenging slate of films.

As indicated in Lang and Donnelly's article, many art houses rely upon their membership programs to support and, indeed, the existence of their cinemas. In addition to the membership programs, AFS runs periodic fundraising campaigns (such as the "Fall for Film" campaign in autumn 2019), and always welcomes donations on their website. AFS has a multi-tiered membership program, which starts at $65 annually and goes up to

$780 annually, with varying levels of benefits. The “Inner Circle” of memberships start at $2,500 annually and run to $25,000 annually. Each of these membership levels has increasing perks and benefits, from discounts to members-only parties and screenings. Additionally, there is a no-cost student membership that provides free tickets to all Signature Series screenings, through their LEARN program/Ed Lowry Student Film Program. AFS also hosts the annual Texas Film Awards, held in March, to honor Texas artists and filmmakers and to fundraise for the Society.

I refer to the AFS audience and membership base as cine-literate, meaning they are the average moviegoer at this type of specialty cinema. As I stated in my introduction, such audience members would presumably have an interest in film aesthetics and history and may even have a cursory knowledge of the intricacies of these fields. The membership program offers a useful way for these audience members to become involved in the cinema; by being a “member,” these individuals may feel more of an affinity for the cultural programming that they are supporting. They are supporting the artistic and programmatic endeavors of AFS, whose work is manifest in myriad ways, from supporting fledgling filmmakers, to screening expertly programmed film series.

AFS’ programming exemplifies the complex intersection between academics and film critics underlying and/or informing the work and choices of art house film programmers. Film programmers and art house cinemas are crucial in the negotiation of film canons. Art house cinemas continue to be a crucial setting in which to view and understand film. My study of AFS, comprised of a discussion of interviews with AFS programmers and a case study of a recent AFS series interrogates how film canons are

developed, presented, and received at repertory cinemas and suggest how these canons can be dissected or dismantled through an understanding of the significance a canon does or does not hold in the scope of a film programmer.

THE PROCESS OF ART HOUSE PROGRAMMING AT AFS

As a non-profit, AFS is a mission-driven organization; this means that everything they do in terms of classes, the cinema's programming, events they may host, etc., should all be in support of the mission ("make, watch, and love film and creative media"). Scholar Barbara Wilinsky suggests that at the postwar dawn of the art house cinema culture in the United States, it behooved the art houses to establish themselves as an artistic, rather than commercial, space (34). This distinction is arguably maintained in contemporary cinematic institutions. Moreover, Wilinsky notes that art houses developed an understanding with their patrons that the cinemas will provide a specific sort of experience that is educational and mission-driven – but one that will allow the patrons to claim a certain socio-cultural position in society (82). Similarly, scholar Michael Z. Newman notes that "Film festivals and art houses are cultural sites and social spaces, and they generate and benefit from a rhetoric of distinction. They function to set apart both cinematic forms and the audiences who consume them" (53). There is an understanding in the relationship of the audience and programmer that they are creating a particular experience in the art house. Thus, a patron visiting AFS is expecting a more complex or challenging cinematic experience from what they may see in a mainstream cinema, due in part to the interesting and compelling works of the film programmers.

All of the interviews with AFS staff confirm many of the aforementioned tenets of the "art house cinema." In my interviews with Lisa Dreyer (Programming Coordinator 2018-2020), Chale Nafus (programmer 2002-2015), and Lars Nilsen (Lead Programmer, who has worked at AFS since 2013), I asked how the programmers considered the mission of the organization of AFS in their day-to-day operations – especially with regards to programming – and asked them to describe how programming is a part of this mission. Dreyer stated simply, "Everything we do at AFS is directly related to our mission. As a non-profit, the films we show are directly servicing our mission statement … We're programming films to expand people's knowledge of film, to expand people's love for film, to educate people about great film and great directors, and everything we do ties back to that mission."

Nilsen sees AFS' adherence to their mission to be something that distinguishes them from other similar cinemas or organizations: "there aren't a lot of people who are using any motivations other than commercial motivations in order to choose what to show. And while we may have commercial motivations up to a point, ultimately our motivations are more mission-driven." Dreyer acknowledges that the programmers may select films that will benefit the cinema financially – but notes that such programming decisions are still mission-related: "we have to pay rent, so we might throw some really obscure titles in there, and then we'll balance that with something – we still love and is mission-driven, but like a David Lynch film, we know that's gonna bring in a big audience, and bring in some money and revenue." Even when AFS is making slightly more financially motivated decisions, they continue to adhere to their mission.

The work of a programmer relies heavily on their experience with the field and their familiarity with what their audience would like to see. When I asked Nilsen how he programs, he said, "If I'm going to be totally honest, I kind of have to admit that I don't know … how I do what I do." Though programming is almost so second-nature to Nilsen at this point, his statement is still revealing in its own way. Nilsen is indicating an awareness for his responsibilities as a programmer, including knowing and understanding the local film community. But he also brings up the important point that:

> [U]ltimately what we do is we end up coming up with programs that are worthy and we hope balanced, and give people this experience of this majestic art form that they might not otherwise be able to get, or they might not otherwise be exposed to and that we do it with critical rigor, and we do it with – I think, I hope – a great deal of credibility which allows us to expose people to things that they might not seek out otherwise … I hope that we provide enough in terms of quality that people learn to trust us. (Nilsen)

As I stated before, the audience members at AFS have come to expect quality programming, and Nilsen's comment reflects an understanding of this expectation, which could also be described as a trust in the programmer. This idea of trust in the programmers' curatorial decisions at AFS recurs throughout these interviews.

AFS has, over the course of its lifetime, been cultivating the taste and trust of its patrons. Each of my interviewers independently brought up this idea of trust. Nilsen described this interaction of trust such as a patron going to see a movie at AFS, entrusting the programmers to give them a valuable experience. He refers to an example of playing

an acclaimed film such as *Vertigo* (1958) as a sort of educational tool: "And if you trust us – to the point to say that *Vertigo* is this great film, it'll help you understand what greatness is in films. It'll help you understand what the elements are that create a great film" (Nilsen). Dreyer and Nilsen both stressed the idea that they strive to curate an inclusive slate of films – in including an array of films from across times, cultures, and filmmakers, they are asking their audience to trust them, to expand what they may envision to be cinema or worthy of a screening at an art house cinema (dare I say, challenging the very idea of a canon, or what might be considered "canonical").

The programmers also have to consider, in more nebulous terms, to which films their audiences may be receptive. Dreyer states, "a lot of it is based on seeing what's available, and also seeing like, hey, has this played recently, or like a lot of films and directors and genres come into style, and out of style." Dreyer is indicating a key aspect of programming: the programmers can only show what they can find. Not only must they find a print or DCP, they also have to secure the rights for the film. As an intern, I periodically reviewed the films playing at other art houses around the country to confirm that the AFS programmers were aware of the current offerings. My fellow intern would also occasionally research ongoing and upcoming film restorations, as distribution companies would re-release such restorations to art house cinemas for programming. Though the programmers can brainstorm and have a dialogue about what films would be best to show at the cinema, it also has to actually be available to be played. As the Programming Coordinator who interfaces with distributors and studios to secure the prints and also the rights to play the films, Dreyer described the more practical elements of the brainstorming

sessions; Nilsen also mentioned that this – availability and access to films – is an aspect of programming that is not often considered. Dreyer and Nilsen detailed that AFS obviously legally acquires their films to be played – and that means only being able to play a film once they have secured the rights along with their copy. There is always a chance that the film may not come so clearly from a distributor who also owns the rights – sometimes the programmers have to track down the rights as well.

When I asked Nilsen what he thought to be an aspect of the job of a programmer that is often overlooked or misunderstood, he wasn't sure of his answer until he asked me what I was surprised by during my internship. I suggested that I was not aware of the work that went into actually finding the films to be played; these logistical details tend to not figure in discussions of programming. Nilsen agreed with me, and described:

> [W]e're not able to just pick and choose cafeteria-style whatever we should care to play … Things would be out of release, there'll be rights situations, or there will even be competitive reasons why we might not have had access to a film. Every time you book a new film, a first-run film, for example, you're entering into a business arrangement with a distributor. And it's a new business arrangement each time. And you're making a different deal every time that you book that film, and they may or may not choose to go into business with you on that film.

These "business arrangements" may preclude AFS from making a programmatic decision. The arrangements made between the exhibitor and the distributor would subsequently affect what does or does not get to be considered canonical. If a film cannot be seen, how could it become canonized? Access to films may seem like a more distant problem, given

the presence of endless specialized streaming platforms that usually allow for instant access from the comfort of one's home. But access to films becomes a problem for programmers, and therefore, their audience. Only what is available can be seen, and therefore, valorized or consecrated in cinematic culture.

Art house cinemas respond to their audiences and what they may be interested in seeing and then choose relevant films accordingly. Wilinsky and Newman discussed how art house theaters position themselves as separate from the mainstream, purporting to peddle a certain type of taste for their self-selective audiences. Dreyer, Nafus, and Nilsen all asserted that programmers are trusted by their audiences to create stimulating programming that expands their ideas of what good cinema is. They also explained that programming decisions are beholden to what their audiences would actually be receptive to, and what would actually be available to screen.

PERSPECTIVES ON SUCCESS IN ART HOUSE PROGRAMMING

The audience is the next element in this equation, and it is another responsibility of the programmer to engage the audience. While the programmer isn't exactly a critic, they are making critical decisions on behalf of their audiences. Nilsen described the writing he does as a programmer – for write-ups in the programs and website – as "criticism-flavored ad copy." In the *Cineaste* symposium, "Film Criticism in America Today (Winter 2000)," critic Morris Dickstein wrote that famed critics such as André Bazin, Pauline Kael, and Andrew Sarris "enfolded movies not only in ideas but also in their own sensibilities, which were as distinctive and idiosyncratic as the directors they wrote about" (40). Dickstein

favors this style of criticism where critics would infuse their personal preferences and beliefs into the films they were discussing. Conversely, also in this symposium, J. Hoberman, the former *Village Voice* critic, declares, "ultimately the ideas expressed are more important than the writer's personal opinion of the particular movie or director under discussion. I'm bored by too much subjectivity. I think it's self-indulgent" (49).

When I started this project, I found myself disagreeing with Hoberman's statement. But the more I learned about the actual act of programming, and the fact that everyone I interviewed in some way noted that it is important to *not* only program to your own tastes, I realize that I think he's right. Between Dickstein's idea of incorporating the "sensibilities" of the programmer and Hoberman's distaste for subjectivity is the trust the audience has for a particular institution or programmer to provide them with an enriching and valuable program. The programmer builds the trust by assessing the needs and interests of their audiences, and sometimes conceding to the audience's tastes, but also taking the opportunity to challenge these tastes by providing an educational experience that expands their notions of cinema.

Continuing with this idea, in the 2010 *Cineaste* symposium on "Repertory Film Programming," Bruce Goldstein, the director of repertory programming at Film Forum in New York, wrote of his own programming philosophy: "it reflects less on critical consensus than my own taste—I want to keep the films that have meant a lot to me in the repertory—but I also pay close attention to what's popular with our audience" (260). While Goldstein is indicating more of a reliance on his own personal taste, there's a difference between taste and preference. Such as, it's not so much what the programmer *wants* to

show, for their own amusement, but something that they believe is worth showing, because they have a taste for it, because their experience allows for them to believe in the worthiness of the film they are showing. (Nilsen also puts forth this idea in his interview.) Tom Vick, film curator at the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution, states that, "Now that we [programmers] have become just one choice in a sea of moving image options, we need to recognize and emphasize the human expertise that makes repertory programming unique, and the importance we have as entrance points for new and restored films" (293). The work of programmers allows filmgoers to move beyond algorithmic existence and to engage with the selections programmers put forward rather than succumbing to the grind of the culture industry. Vick's statement echoes the ideas of trust in programmers that my interviewees mentioned. The AFS audience is appreciating the expertise of these programmers each time they visit the cinema.

The programmer can select films to play, but it remains up to the audience to buy tickets. The programmer has to entice their viewer to come to the cinema. However, as Nilsen said simply, "we're not playing just anything. If it's in our calendar, we've effectively told people that we think that it's worthy." I had not thought of this. I was envisioning a potential visitor to AFS ruminating over the film write-ups and trying to decide if it was worth it to go to the cinema to pay for a ticket. But what Nilsen said has to be right – most anyone who is going to see a movie at AFS is doing so because they believe in the programmers, and they are willing to make an investment in the programmers, the cinema, and their community. As Nafus said, "I felt like if I had chosen the film, that it already meant that I thought it was of significance in some way." In terms of how AFS

would contextualize the films for their audience, however, Dreyer points out that some films benefit from further contextualization, and that the tools AFS presents to do so – such as write-ups and introductions – allow the audiences to have a more meaningful experience with the films. Dreyer explains, "context really shapes how someone views the films … It helps to have intelligent discourse about things and talk about, you know, hey, these are the positives and yes … you will see this part and it's backwards." Dreyer is also referring to the fact that some of the films that AFS will show may go against contemporary social or political norms – however, the introduction provided by a programmer allows the audience to re-shape their expectations and to engage with the film on a more critical level.

For the most part, it's difficult to actually measure the "success" of a program, because AFS is not necessarily concerned with how the films may do financially. In *Making Museums Matter*, museum administrator Stephen E. Weil writes about how museums – as social institutions that are not focused primarily on commercial success – may understand their missions; it is useful to apply Weil's theorizations on AFS as a social institution in a similar sense to a museum. Weil writes: "The commercial enterprise pursues a quantifiable economic outcome; the social enterprise pursues a social outcome that may or may not be quantifiable but that, in any event, must certainly be ascertainable" (37). What Weil is describing echoes the responses from the programmers who alluded to the success at AFS as a gestalt – a feeling, or an idea. Nilsen described, "I think the reception, the sort of afterglow of a film, the way that people react to it, which can be judged both in the lobby in real time, and emails that people might send, or even like people's Letterboxd or social media reactions to films. That'll often be one way that I kind of gauge it. I think

all film programmers are likely to be sort of feedback junkies." Nafus noted that when he was programming, there was not necessarily a way for him to measure feedback, therefore, his feedback "became anecdotal to a great extent … I don't think it really goes beyond just interpersonal and anecdotal. And just repeat customers. Repeat audience members."

Similarly, Dreyer pointed out that an audience member becoming a member of AFS is a great indicator for them when measuring success in their work. She also stated that, "those individual interactions mean a lot more to mean and to the team personally … it feels good when people react really favorably to things, or they have a great Q&A with people afterwards, or they will bring back people, or tweet about it, or whatever" (Dreyer). The AFS programmers are aware of their audience, and ostensibly do everything in service of their audience. This is an indication of what the programmers do with this understanding, in terms of feeling an obligation or an inclination towards educating their audiences on cinematic history or significant/canonical films.

Criticism and programming inherently interact with critical and personal examinations of taste – how these ideas relate to programmers demonstrating the significance of films they have selected to program, and how they leverage the trust that their audience has in them to provide an interesting slate of films. When the programmers assess the success of these programs, they rely on personal anecdotes, or interactions. Both the conveyed significance of films programmers and the resulting evaluation of the success of the program are done with careful consideration for the audience involved, but ultimately, rely on the experience of the programmers. The human factor of the programmer is an important one – as Vick says, "we need to recognize and emphasize the

human expertise that makes repertory programming unique" (293). The "human expertise" of programming means the programmers are bringing in information from criticism, engaging in a sort of criticism themselves, and providing a slate of films they believe their audience will be interested in seeing, and then they are able to tell if their program has been successful based on how their audience interfaces with the films. This human expertise is the interesting and engaging factor of programming, rather than the subscription to a prescribed or historically significant canon.

REINTERPRETING CANON IN PROGRAMMING

Distinctive programming is one of the key features of an art house cinema. As became apparent in my interviews, although programmers feel some kind of educational imperative to their audiences, canon does not often stand out as a tenet of their programs. Scholar Jonathan Lupo's article, "Loaded Canons: Contemporary Film Canons, Film Studies, and Film Discourse," focuses on the academic debate on canons and extends the debate into journalistic critical realm. Lupo argues that academics did not want to set specific canonical favorites, which he indicates was to keep a fair and historical view of cinematic history; critics then took up the opportunity to pick such favorites to engage their readers (220). Film programmers occupy the unique space between the academic and critical realms, given that they work to contextualize and present films in informed series or programs.

Programmers are always changing our understanding of films in the constant reintroduction and reinterpretation of films in repertory programming. As I mentioned in

my introduction, Dr. Janet Staiger's article "The Politics of Film Canons" asserts that the academic community must be aware of the power dynamics that facilitate canon formation (19). The art house cinema is a productive space for undermining staid traditions and power dynamics, because films are constantly being re-presented in new forms and series, which prompts new ideas and understandings. Relatedly, as I also discussed previously, in her article "Loose Canons," scholar Ava Preacher Collins challenges the idea that academia has positioned itself as a superior institution to speak down to the public. Again, she asserts that the academy "is in fact only one institution among many" (Preacher Collins 101). The art house cinema is a space opposite academia, where ideas are necessarily changing and flexible. The programmer is constantly reevaluating and representing a repertoire of films, films which would always take on a new meaning depending on the exact audience, moment, and setting in which they are screened. Dr. Felicia Chan notes that film programming can be perceived as a "delicate balance" that balances counter-hegemonic programming within hegemonic institutions or settings (258). Programming can be used in these spaces to challenge historical norms. In the case of AFS, they are challenging the belief that canons are static and universal – they are always being renegotiated.

When I asked the AFS programmers about canonization in their series, I adjusted my expectations about "canon" in real time. I was surprised to learn that it was not an important part of their programming. Given that I interviewed Nilsen first, this statement from him in particular struck me, and informed my interviews with Nafus and Dreyer: "I think factors like canons are almost like, gravity, or something. It's just a factor." Going into this project, I considered canon to be *the* factor, *the* thing that *everyone* must be

concerned about: What are the great movies? Why do we call them great? But really, as Nilsen says, it's just another thing to think about. He even described it as a "marketing tool … there's light anxiety if you haven't heard of these films, and these are great films" (Nilsen). Programmers and their marketing counterparts may leverage the idea of canon to motivate a potential audience member to visit the cinema, but that's not the only reason they would program that film, similar to what I described with Drafthouse in chapter two.

At the start of our interview, Nafus explained that as a film professor at Austin Community College, he did feel an "obligation" to highlight "canonical" films and directors because he thought his students should have that knowledge. But when he started working with AFS, "I became an anti-canon programmer. Anti-traditional canon. And what I chose to do was to try to open up the canon as much as I could, and I really thought of it that way" (Nafus). Nafus also spoke of the canon as a "shared vision," where traditionally marginalized voices (non-white, non-male, non-Western) perspectives are "fostering additions to a canon, or replacement of canon."

Dreyer also spoke about this idea, of providing an alternate to traditional ideas of "canon": "We want to give people a good understanding of where film – like the history of film. And then, also, including things that have been overlooked, like things by women, people of color, queer filmmakers, that the first time around weren't given the proper due" (Dreyer). She believes that the programming at AFS "[respects] the canon … but also [broadens] it, to make it more inclusive" (Dreyer). She provides the example of screening a canonical romantic film such as *Casablanca* (1942), but then also showing *Desert Hearts* (1985), "an underlooked lesbian love story" (Dreyer). I was struck by the fact that each of

these programmers, independent from one another, all echoed the same idea. That the AFS Cinema provides them with the opportunity to expand ideas of canon and film history, and to therefore help refocus how their audience may be thinking about films and film history.

But because of the aforementioned administrative or logistical processes that may affect what films can be shown at the AFS Cinema, I asked Dreyer, who, as the Programming Coordinator, interfaced with distributors and rightsholders, about the stakeholders in the process of canonization. These stakeholders or factors may include a print or rights to a film not being available, or an exciting program simply falling flat with the audience. She agreed that if a film is readily available, it is easier to play it, and "if you get exposed to [a film] enough and you have enough people telling you it should be there, then, you know, it's there. So, then those smaller films that only one theater shows that *should* be in the canon – it's not going to reach the same amount of people" (Dreyer). The simple fact is that if a film is not shown or made available, it does not have any chance to be "canonized" or even appreciated or seen. Dreyer then stressed the importance of restorations in giving films a new life: "Distributors really can play a huge part – if they get into the restoration business – in helping those films find a new audience." Dreyer pointed in particular to the recently restored film *The Queen* (1968) brought the film back into repertory circuit, garnering a new audience and therefore establishing it in a queer cinematic canon. Distributors and companies that restore films then have the ability to re-present films to programmers that may be able to include the films in their programs, and therefore show them to a new audience, or show them again to reassert their significance.

There is then the element of the audience that must turn out for the movies that the programmers are selecting. Dreyer again spoke of the idea of trust between the audience and the programmers:

> [N]ot everything we play is for everyone, but we're never going to play a bad movie to make money. And so that's how we get people to trust us. And, I do know that people see movies here, and they'll be like, "Maybe that wasn't for me, but I do see the artistic merits of it, and I know why it was programmed." They know we're not just gonna throw in some – there's a method behind our madness. So, it's ultimately it is on us to program good things, and to promote them, and to have the audience trust us, but I don't know if I'd say we have the power in that situation.

Dreyer states that there is this understanding and trust between the audience and the programmer, but the programmer cannot make an audience receptive to the films that are being shown. Nafus referred to this delicate balance: "I mean, it's an act of curation in the same way a person who is curating an art exhibit or something. So, you have to study, and explore, and discover, and then make evaluations of what you want to share with an audience … And it's not catering to the audience, it's just – I really had a feel for the audience. Or, that develops over time." The audience is trusting the programmer to make a good programming choice on their behalf. The programmer is not "catering" to the audience but is rather providing an informed program of films based on their experience with their audience members.

The programmer serves as the conduit between the industry and the audience and knows that they have done the best they could to create a compelling program. As Nilsen

says, “you can see great films or a great series of films, and you’re just like you will never think the same about some things. You’ve gone into a world of empathy, that you wouldn’t have gone into without seeing things through another person’s eyes.” The programmers at AFS try to provide an alternative to the traditional canon of films because they see themselves as positioned to reevaluate the power that is traditionally held by canons, harkening back to Lupo, Preacher Collins, and Staiger renegotiating the power dynamics of the canon in academia.

While the programmers must negotiate the creation of their programs based on what is available and what might work for their audiences, they are also cultivating or training their audience to try something different. Dreyer says: “you just have to cultivate and kind of guide your audience into trying things that they wouldn’t think were necessarily for them. And I think in general, our audience and our members are really adventurous, and they trust us, and they’ll come out and see a lot of things that might be challenging.” So AFS may provide films that are traditionally thought of as canonical, but they are not beholden to only showing “great” films in the history of the medium. They are also committed to showing their audience interesting and compelling films for a variety of reasons, not just because of the outsized influence it may have had on the medium.

AFS Series: “Half Angel: The Essential Cinema of Jean Arthur”

In August 2019, AFS presented a series of five films in the filmography of the actress Jean Arthur. Even her obituary in *The New York Times* noted Arthur’s impressive transition from silent films into sound (Flint). The series presented *If You Could Only Cook*

(1935), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Easy Living* (1937), *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), and *The More the Merrier* (1943). The brief of the series on the AFS website reads:

> "I just couldn't act in a bad picture," the actress Jean Arthur once said, and, after she had gotten past the rocky shoals of the silent era she rarely did. She acted in some movies that probably would have been bad without her, but she brought so much to them that their entertainment value – and sometimes a good deal more – was assured.
>
> Born in 1900 (though she hid behind a phony birthdate for years), she was good more experienced than the average ingenue when she finally broke through in the mid-'30s. Arthur did alright for a performer plagued with stage fright her entire career. Her camera-reluctance gives her a little extra added edge, and it really works.
>
> Here is Jean Arthur the impossibly charming romantic comedian, the emotionally resonant everywoman, the oddball whose charm wins out. Every little crack of voice, every self-conscious hair-flip helps to tell a story that we can still identify with acutely all these years later.

AFS also produced a corresponding trailer to market the series to its audience. The trailer is a valuable marketing tool that helped me to see Arthur's beauty, humor, edginess, and quirk, all of the selling points they were hoping to encompass in the series. Indeed, each time I saw the trailer play at AFS Cinema before another film, it garnered huge laughs, with punchy quips such as "You don't have to get mad just because you're so stupid," from

Easy Living. I asked Nilsen about how they decided to focus on Arthur for this series, he stated:

> Watching and re-watching the films as part of my programming process, I was struck by just how modern [Arthur] seemed. For people who think of Classic Hollywood as an unending stream of patriarchal conventions, these little moments of honesty which help to build a character who is a complete woman, may help to shine a light on the contribution that women were able to make to these films, and to sharpen the senses so that these films can be read with greater consciousness of the many contributions made by women to them.

AFS found a way to make Arthur relevant to its 2019 audience by highlighting what makes this star unique, amidst films with such recognizable directors as Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, and George Stevens, and alongside male stars such as Cary Grant and Gary Cooper. By centering a series on a female star, the AFS programmers encourage their audiences to expand their understanding of stardom, auteurist directors, and Hollywood industry and history.

The "Half Angel" series highlights how AFS is working against the canonical grain and encouraging their audience to celebrate an actor they might otherwise overlook. When I asked Nilsen specifically about this genesis of this series, he explained to me that he has created a precedent for the cinema to present series on the "female film workers of Classical Hollywood." He described, "I think it's important for people to see that, even though women were excluded from directing positions, they were making creative contributions to filmmaking in other ways. A film has many authors … I think it's part of our role as

educators to put ideas like this forth in our programming and in the written and verbal materials that contextualize it" (Nilsen).

"Half Angel" is an example of how AFS is providing context to their audiences to help them approach films and film history in different ways, such as acknowledging the work of women in Classical Hollywood. Not only would the audience then reevaluate their understanding of film history, but by highlighting the many workers that contribute to a film, they may also find themselves challenging the auteur theory. Audiences may also extend this understanding to reevaluate how they deem films to be traditionally "canonical" or otherwise significant. These would be the educational or pedagogical goals of the programmers that the audience member would be privy to as a filmgoer at AFS specifically.

In terms of how they selected the films to program, and whether or not they were playing into canonical expectations with the selection of films they provided, Nilsen said, "I like to put together lineups and I consider the flow of the series in terms of variety, watchability, novelty, etc. … I just tried to build a good series by using my own taste as a guide." Of course, there were the usual factors of creating a logical schedule and seeing what was available, and Nilsen noted that there was a new print of *Easy Living*, so that made it an easy decision to select that film for the series. Nilsen said that it was a successful series ("Many people were introduced to the joy of Jean Arthur"), and the numbers reflected this accordingly. The series made me personally aware of Arthur, and were I provided the opportunity to watch a film she may be in, she would now be a "selling point." Nilsen corroborated that in terms of ticket sales, "attendance was steady, and, if not especially well-attended, it was on balance as success."

Being able to dissect the "Half Angel" series illustrates the themes of this chapter, given that Nilsen was able to share the thought process behind and the reception of this series. "Half Angel" demonstrates the conscious work of AFS to provide a unique theatrical experience to their audience, and to go in-depth on the work of a woman in Classical Hollywood. The context AFS provided in the series – with film write-ups, introductions, and the contrast throughout the series of the five films – allows for their audience to learn more about Arthur as an actor, and as Nilsen says, "to sharpen the senses so that these films can be read with greater consciousness of the many contributions made by women to them." In other words, if an audience member loves this series and realizes the importance of Arthur to the films as well as the strength of her performance, perhaps they will reconsider the factors that make a film "good," and therefore become a more active and astute filmgoer. This educational experience is facilitated by the presentation of five films in a series, or just another opportunity to visit the AFS Cinema.

CONCLUSION

Film programmers create informed programs based on their knowledge of film aesthetics, criticism, and history, but most importantly, by knowing their audience. AFS Cinema is a case study in how programmers build trust with their audiences by acknowledging the cine-literacy of their audiences, but also challenging that literacy to expand their ideas of what makes movies "valuable," and what is worth valuing in terms of canonical and historical narratives on film. The AFS programmers play into the storied history of the American art house by helping their audience members to distinguish

themselves from the mainstream – and in doing so, encourage their audiences to expand what they may understand to be important or canonical films.

Programmers may face challenges of access when selecting films for programs – distributors are a significant factor in this negotiation of access – and programmers cannot predict what their audiences may or may not respond to. But as my interviewees all mentioned, the trust that builds between the audience and the programmer allows for the programmer to make decisions that they believe their audience will appreciate and will therefore be successful. As Kozberg and Peecook wrote in "A Letter to Variety" concerning art house cinemas, "They are effectively strategizing financial growth and sustainability to support exemplary theatrical experiences, media education programs, and meaningful conversations." Art house cinemas do more than exist as theaters for financial gain. They are creating educational experiences for their audiences to support learning in their communities. AFS is extending this mission and intent to reshape film canons and film history. The films presented as a part of an AFS program encourage their audience to explore film aesthetics, canons, and history. The audience is empowered with the tools and the access to shape their own knowledge due to the education received in these programs. This critical capacity coupled with this knowledge-building encourages thinking outside of mandated, historical canons. Film programming liberates film history from these canonical confines.

Conclusion: The Programmer Knows Best

This thesis has argued for a consideration of cinematic canons as flexible, dynamic discursive tools. Canons are dynamic not only in the sense that they can be constantly edited and reconsidered, but also because they require interaction from across academic, critical, and industrial realms. Programmers must be advocates for figuring a balance between each of these facets of film exhibition and programming. This thesis has demonstrated how this partnership is manifest in the role of the film programmer.

In chapter two, I discussed how Drafthouse utilizes canon as a way to market their programmed films. My focus on the Drafthouse Recommends series demonstrated how this series – as it is tied so closely to the Drafthouse brand – is a way in which the cinema chain markets its particular taste culture. With a close look at a film in the series, *Call Me By Your Name*, I was able to detail the ways in which inclusion in the series makes films canonized upon their release. In chapter three, my exploration of the programming practices and metrics for success of a programmed series at AFS reflects a dynamic regard for canon. At AFS, "the," or even "a," canon does not often factor into programming decisions – if anything, programming may be made against a canon, in an effort to expand the educational aspect of their series. By focusing on how the film programmer negotiates canonical formations, I have outlined the ways in which the programmer refracts the knowledge of academia, criticism, and industry to create the theatrical moviegoing experience for their patrons. A working film canon may or may not be a factor that these programmers take into consideration. But a canon inevitably becomes a part of these programming practices.

One important factor in the process of cinematic canonization that emerged later on in chapter three is the issue of access. The AFS programmers all noted how programmers can only program what is available. The availability of films is left to the distributors and other rightsholders. This issue was considered in some of the literature I have already reviewed – Jonathan Lupo's "Loaded Canons," as well as in the critic Jonathan Rosenbaum's book *Movie Wars* (which Lupo mentions in his article).

Throughout his article, Lupo repeatedly mentions the importance of access, mostly in reference to Rosenbaum's work. Lupo notes that in his work, Rosenbaum is "Acknowledging that evaluating movies (and consequently constructing a canon out of those judgments)" which is related to (quoting Rosenbaum's article "List-o-Mania" here,) "access and cultural conditioning–not taste or intelligence in isolation from these factors" (Lupo 226). Lupo describes how Rosenbaum specifically notes his own "cultural conditioning" and how it factors into which movies he deems canonical (226). Related to one thread of my argument throughout my thesis, Lupo notes how Rosenbaum teases out "the subjective nature of personal history and memory and the roles they play in the construction of canons" (226). My project touched on the personal nature of programming, and the human element of the programmer. Rosenbaum approaches these issues more specifically in his book *Movie Wars*.

In his book, Rosenbaum discusses the importance of access to films during his childhood – as his grandfather owned cinemas that his father also worked at – as well as later in life, when he was able to watch films at the British Film Institute while living in London, or the Cinémathèque Français while living in Paris (99). Rosenbaum noted this

fact when making his own list of canonical films – because his "acquaintance with American cinema was based on [these] two atypical forms of access that determined my cultural conditioning" (99). Rosenbaum explicitly draws the connection between the access that irrevocably conditioned his cultural tastes and preferences. In this way, the importance of access is underlined – films can only be canonized if they are being seen. And the conditions under which the films are seen will inevitably color viewer's perception of the films.

Recently, in the COVID-19 pandemic that took hold of the United States in March 2020, it has become glaringly obvious that viewers can only watch what is available, and, therefore, can only consider canonical what is available. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the film industry as it has every other industry. Not only are films in production on hiatus, many films have been pushed back due to the lack of theatrical outlets. With the notable exception of Universal Pictures' *Trolls World Tour,* which had unprecedented day-and-date on demand release for a major studio films, many upcoming features – especially summer tentpole releases (*Wonder Woman 1984,* Marvel Studios's *Black Widow*, Disney/Pixar's *Soul*) – have been delayed. However, the ways in which some distributors and exhibitors have found methods to maintain their output and audiences provides me for a segue into the next phase of this project. This current dynamic crucially demonstrates the power of studios and distributors. Not only are distributors and exhibitors finding ways to make films accessible to audience members at home, in some cases, programmers are still able to work their perspective into these film screenings, virtually.

In mid-March 2020, the Austin Film Society Cinema and all Drafthouse locations across the U.S. closed. AFS laid off a third of its staff and all of its hourly cinema employees and Drafthouse furloughed 80% of its corporate staff and created a relief fund for its affected employees from corporate-owned cinemas and headquarters staff. Both organizations have found ways to adapt. Drafthouse revitalized its Terror Tuesday and Weird Wednesday repertory screenings with virtual screenings as well. Some Drafthouse locations are also taking online orders for its food, to be picked up curbside at the cinemas. AFS has provided virtual introductions to some of their screenings by their programmers and others; they will link to these introductions in their weekly emails announcing the new titles of their virtual cinema. On April 17, they provided a link to Nilsen's introduction of the documentary *The Booksellers* (2020) – which they note they would have been screening in the cinema anyway.

These adjustments that Drafthouse and AFS have made demonstrate the vitality of programming despite the circumstances. These virtual cinemas are also providing new modes of access; one wonders if this access will continue when the pandemic ends. As illuminated by Lupo and Rosenbaum and again, by the AFS programmers in my third chapter, being able to access films is the only way they can be canonized. New restorations and re-releases are (or were) happening all the time, which gives films the opportunity to find new audiences and therefore once again be considered canonizable.

This thesis project explored the shifting nature of canons, and the importance of the work of programmers as well as critics in determining what is canonical. These definitions can change over time and will depend on the audiences for which the programmers are

making their series – the audience is a necessary factor. The programmer can provide contextual information and explain why a film is significant, like at AFS, or support the film in their in-house programming, like at Drafthouse – but what happens if the films are not available in the first place? The next factors to consider in this dynamic process are the distributors and rightsholders that make these films available to these cinemas and programmers. These stakeholders are the next steps in better understanding the process of canonization.

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